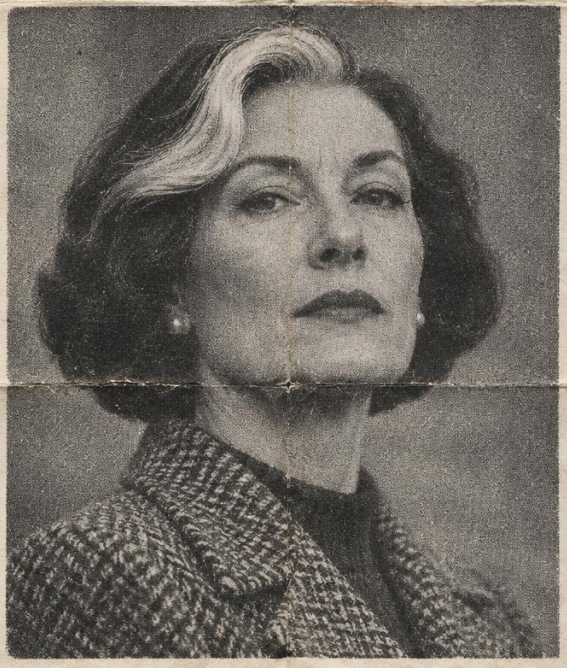
WANTED DEAD



MISS PENNY

One Million Pounds

SPECTOR

WANTED DEAD

Lumen with Chip Cook

The Fold

Inspector Kerr brought the dead man's luggage back into the interview room to show them where the paper had been found. It was an ordinary brown case with a broken strap. Penny thought it would have looked more at home on somebody's bed, waiting for its owner to make up his mind about a clean shirt.

"The constable took it out by this corner," Kerr said. She pointed to the outside pocket. "He hadn't undone the buckles. He was looking for a luggage label."

"Did he find one?" Watson asked.

"Inside the lid. I thought you'd want to know which he found first."

Kerr set an open folder between them. Penny could see herself immediately. Whoever had folded the paper had left enough of her face showing to make it hard to mistake her for anybody else. She had a peculiar wish to turn it over before Watson could see it, as if somebody had brought her an unflattering holiday photograph.

"May I?" she asked.

Kerr nodded. Penny opened the lower half by its corners.

WANTED DEAD.

For a moment she thought there must be another word. Watson, standing beside her now, read the heading twice. She did it silently, but her finger went back to the left as though she were helping a child keep her place.

Under the photograph was the amount. One million pounds. At the bottom, by itself, was a name Penny hadn't seen on a piece of paper for years.

SPECTOR.

Penny sat down. The chair was closer than she expected and she caught the edge of the table with her hip.

"Is that what they used to call themselves?" Kerr asked.

"It's what we used to call them. I don't know what they called themselves over breakfast."

"Would you recognise something they'd sent?"

"I'd want more than a name on the bottom."

Kerr brought a second folder from the other end of the table. It contained a copy. The paper was too white and Penny's dark coat had come out almost black.

"You can take that one," Kerr said. "I'd like it back if you decide to show it round and somebody writes on it."

"Who would write on it?"

"Someone who knows a face and thinks the police can't be bothered to find out whose it is."

Penny looked at her again. Kerr had moved her chair a little, so that she could see the picture without having to reach across Penny. It was the consideration of it that nearly undid her.

"I thought I'd know what to do when something like this happened," Penny said.

"What did you think you'd do?"

“Tell someone.”

“You have.”

Watson fetched Penny’s gloves from the chair by the door. Penny took them without putting them on. One of them had a screw in the thumb from a morning when she’d tried to mend the catch on the bedroom window. If she’d had a pocket to hand, she would have put it there. She turned the glove upside down and put the screw on the table.

“That’s mine,” she said when Kerr looked at it.

Kerr let her put it back in the glove.

Just Past the Camera

Outside the station Watson asked Penny whether she wanted to walk. Penny said she did, then stood still while a bus went by. She had spent half the interview looking at the sum because it was the only part she could read without thinking about the man who had carried it.

"A million seems rather excessive," she said.

"What would you have thought appropriate?"

"I was hoping you'd say you couldn't put a price on me."

"I certainly couldn't get hold of a million before the banks shut."

Penny laughed, and was relieved to discover that she could do it in the street. Nobody passing them turned round.

They walked as far as a shop with tables in its window. A woman inside was tipping sugar from a large bag into a row of little bowls. Watson chose a table at the back, away from the glass. There was barely room for their coats on the hooks. She asked for two teas and a slice of something she could divide without asking for a knife.

Penny unfolded the copy. It made her uneasy to have it spread between them like a bill.

"I know that coat," she said. "The button had come loose. The one at the throat. I did it up all the same because the wind was getting in."

"Where?"

"I'm fairly sure it was Waverley. Outside, where someone had come out to carry a case and left a door wedged open. I

remember being glad of the noise the door made. I'd been waiting long enough to be glad of anything."

Watson moved the copy so Penny could see it without the shadow of the teapot. "Who were you looking at?"

"The man taking the photograph, I suppose."

"Look where your eyes go."

Penny leaned nearer. In the picture she had one hand at her collar and the other out of view. Her chin had lifted a little. Her eyes were on something to the right of whoever held the camera. She knew the expression. It was the one she wore when she'd seen a person in the distance and hadn't quite decided to wave.

"I might have been looking for a taxi."

"You might."

"Or expecting somebody to come through that door."

"Yes."

"Will you agree with all of them?"

"Until you remember one."

The woman brought the tea and a fruit scone already cut in half. Watson put a half on each saucer. Penny's was the larger one. She wondered whether Watson knew she'd noticed.

"James was always telling people to meet him outside stations," she said. "You'd ask him where and he'd say he'd find you. He seemed to think that counted as a place."

"Were you waiting for him that day?"

"I remember the coat and I remember the door. I can get James into the picture easily enough if I shut my eyes."

Watson waited.

"That's what worries me," Penny said.

She picked up the photograph again. A square of pale cloth showed at the very edge of the image. It might have been a cuff. It might have been a reflection on a car. Whoever had made the flyer had left just enough of it for Penny to spend the rest of the day trying to make a person out of it.



Copies

Before they left the café, Watson asked to see the paper again. She wanted to know whether the line beneath the photograph belonged to the photograph or to the lettering. Penny held it where the light from the kitchen fell across it. The line stopped just short of the edge.

"Someone's done this with scissors," Watson said.

"Or it looked that way before Kerr's machine got hold of it."

"The original had the same line. I thought it was a scratch on the table."

Penny considered showing the copy to a stationer. She wanted to know whether the lettering would tell him anything about where it had come from. She also knew how readily she would have repeated the story herself, if it had been somebody else's face.

Watson drew the luggage pocket in her notebook. It came out looking like the front of a well-fed apron.

"I can do it again," she said.

"I knew what it was."

"That's because I told you."

Penny took the pencil and drew the flap wider. She had been watching Kerr's hand when the inspector lifted it. There was no fastener on the pocket. Anything put there could have worked its way up during a journey. Anything put there afterwards would have been easy to find.

"He might have wanted to see my face without taking the whole thing out," she said.

“He might have been taking it to somebody.”

“Somebody who wanted the money?”

“Someone who was meant to notice your face. The constable did.”

Penny thought of the broken strap. The case wouldn’t have been comfortable to carry on a long walk. She kept wanting to know how far the dead man had carried it, as though the distance would tell her whether he’d felt the contents were worth the trouble.

“I would rather he’d been an awful man,” she said.

“Do we know enough about him to grant you that?”

“No. We hardly ever do.”

Penny paid for the tea. While Watson put on her coat, Penny asked the woman behind the counter if she could borrow a sheet of newspaper. She wrapped the copy in a page from the middle. At the door she stopped to fold one more corner over, so that none of her face showed.

At a crossing Watson asked what she remembered about the last time the name had meant anything to her. Penny watched a driver wave another car out ahead of him, then regret it when a third followed.

“I remember it used to clear a room,” she said. “Anybody who could stay did. Afterwards the people who stayed would remember who had gone.”

“Did you believe it every time you heard it?”

“I took it seriously every time. That took up most of the time I might have spent deciding what I believed.”

They crossed when the traffic stopped. On the far pavement a man was putting a fresh bill in a shop window. He stood back to see if it was straight. Penny found herself

reading the whole thing, including the date and where to ask for tickets. She couldn't have said what the notice underneath it was for.

She waited for Watson beside a drain where the pavement narrowed. "When Kerr showed me the amount," she said, "I was already trying to remember what I'd done to them."

"Did you think of anything?"

"I thought of things James had done. I used to think I wouldn't have to ask which of us was being threatened."

Penny put a hand to the paper inside her coat. The next time somebody saw her face, she wanted to be there to see what they did.

The Call

By the time they got back to the Thistle, the basin Jean kept beneath the umbrella stand had collected a little water. Penny could see the oval of the front window in it.

Jean came out of the kitchen with a plate covered by another plate.

"Is there anything either of you intends to eat before supper?"

"I couldn't say," Penny told her.

"That generally means yes if it's already on the table."

She lifted the top plate. There were four pieces of bread and butter, with the crusts still on. Watson took one before Jean could cover them again.

“Has anyone asked for us?” Penny said.

“Someone rang for room four. I said there wasn’t a telephone in it.”

“When was this?”

“While you were out. He asked if you’d be in for supper. I said I hoped so. I’d bought the potatoes.”

“Did he give you a name?”

“No. Did you want me to get one?”

Penny said she would, if there was another call. Jean put the cover back on the plate. She asked if Penny wanted her to give anything else away about the potatoes.

“Only if there’s enough for everybody.”

“There’s always enough for everybody. It’s how you get rid of them afterwards that takes some thought.”

Jean took the plates through to the bar. Penny stayed in the passage. She could hear the door open behind her and had to tell herself that this was what doors in pubs did.

The Key

Jean found Watson at the foot of the stairs, looking at the hooks behind the bar. The keys each had a wooden block attached to them. On the one for room three, somebody had painted a red flower around the number. There was no key on the hook for four.

"We've got ours," Watson said. "I was wondering what happens if we go out with it and you need to get in."

"I knock."

"And if nobody answers?"

"If there's a leak, I get Alec. If I'm bringing towels, I go back downstairs with them."

Watson hadn't asked cheerfully enough. Jean took the cloth off her shoulder and folded it so that the damp part was on the inside.

"Has something been taken?"

"We don't know that anything's been touched. The call made us wonder."

Jean went into the kitchen and came back with a ring of keys. She held it flat on her palm. Some were so old the teeth looked like the points of broken pencils.

"One of these opens your door. There's another that opens the window in the kitchen if you knock the catch down with a spoon. It was like this when I came."

"Does Alec keep a set?"

"He knows where I keep mine."

"Does anyone else?"

"Well, you do now."

Watson looked down at the ring, then at the bar. Jean had come through the swinging door from the kitchen. There was nothing to tell anyone in the passage where she'd been before that. Watson had nearly made a place on a shelf out of a handful of keys in a woman's palm.

"May I ask you something else?"

"You're doing splendidly without asking if you may."

“Did he sound as though he’d rung the pub before?”

Jean considered that. “He waited while I finished saying the name. A regular usually gets in before I’m halfway through. You can hear them saying hello to Alec while I’m still telling them where they’ve rung.”

“So you’d say he was a stranger?”

“I’d say he let me finish.”

Watson took out her notebook. On another day she would have written the word stranger first and remembered afterwards to put a question mark beside it. Jean watched her write the whole sentence. Then she put away the keys, and Watson turned to give her the small privacy of doing it unobserved.

Upstairs, Penny had spread two sheets of newspaper under the window. She was kneeling with the glove on one hand.

“Is it worse?” Watson asked.

“The wood’s worn. It won’t take the screw.” Penny picked at a spot of paint on her cuff. “I can shut it.”

She did, then drew the curtain a little so she could see whether it would catch on the latch. Outside, someone was wheeling a bicycle along the close. He didn’t look up. On the landing, Jean set a jug down beside the door of another room, and Watson went out to help her find a saucer wide enough to stand it on.

Before Supper

They rang Kerr from the telephone at the foot of the stairs. The inspector asked to speak to Jean. Penny held out the receiver, and Jean wiped both hands before taking it.

"He didn't ask for Miss Penny," Jean said. "He said room four. Then he said 'they' when he asked about supper."

She listened for a while. On the wall beside her were two hooks, one with a pencil on a string and one that held nothing. Penny watched Jean work the string out of a knot with her free hand.

"No," Jean said finally. "I shouldn't think I would. I'd know that he didn't wait for me to finish about supper before he put down the phone. That covers quite a lot of people."

She handed the receiver back to Penny and took the pencil into the kitchen to sharpen it.

Kerr asked whether they wanted a different room. Penny looked up the stair. The thought of a different bed and a different window had the appeal of a holiday somebody else had arranged. She wondered how long it would be before she started listening to the sounds on the new landing.

"Give me a little while," she said. "Watson and I haven't talked about it."

"I'll be here awhile yet. If I go out, tell the desk how to find you."

"One thing before you go," Kerr said. "The evening paper rang. They've had a copy of the flyer through their letter box. Same photograph, same price, same name at the bottom."

"Will they print it?"

"They've agreed to hold it. It was in an envelope addressed to the editor. No note with it."

Penny put down the telephone and told Watson about the copy sent to the editor. Watson looked at the newspaper wrapped around their own copy, then through the bar door at the place Jean had been standing.

"He knew the room number," Penny said.

"He could have stayed here before. He could have asked somebody who knew."

"He could have put the number on a piece of blue paper."

Watson turned. "He could."

Penny looked at the copy, still wrapped in newspaper. Someone had meant the paper's editor to see that face. She wanted to see what Alec did when she showed it to him.

Alec was at the far end of the bar with a stack of saucers. Penny took the wrapped flyer to him and waited until he had put the last one away.

"I'd like you to look at something," she said.

He made a space on the bar. Penny had to help him with the fold she'd made over the photograph. The first thing he saw was her face.

"Has Watson seen it?"

"Yes."

He let go of the corner. Penny put her hand on it to stop the paper folding in on itself.

"I expected you to ask where it came from," she said.

"I expect you'd tell me, if you wanted me to know."

She told him that Kerr had shown it to them and had kept the original. Alec looked at the sum again.

“Did anyone tell you what a man does after he reads a thing like this?” she asked.

“I don’t know what you’d want him to do.”

“I think I’d want him to ask me.”

He looked across the room. Jean had set a dish on the corner table and was standing back to see whether the steam was reaching the framed darts photograph.

“Would you like me to stay here while you tell me?” Alec asked.

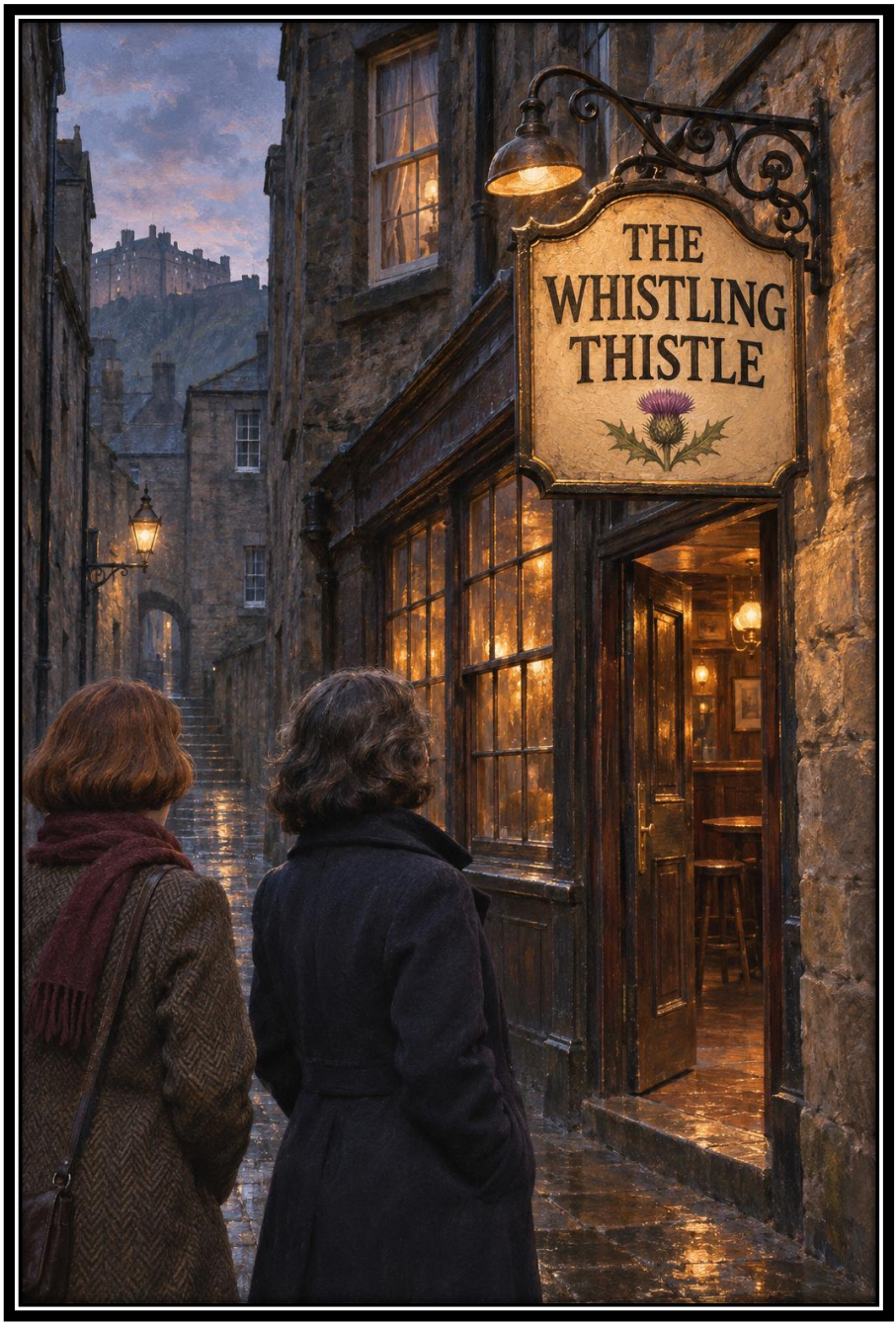
For a little while Penny had thought she would ask him where he’d been when Hale entered the pub. It would have been easy to begin there. She had practised the question often enough. Today she found herself wanting to ask him something harder.

“Would you tell me if I ought to be afraid of you?”

Alec made a movement as if he meant to reach for the paper, then drew his hand back.

“I’d like to think I would,” he said.

Jean called to ask which table wanted the first plate. Alec waited long enough for Penny to know she could ask him to stay. Then she folded the copy and he went to get the supper.


THE
WHISTLING
THISTLE

Across the Close

The rain stopped before supper. Penny went out to get a little air and found herself looking back at the pub from the opposite wall. She could read the sign in the light from the front window. THE WHISTLING THISTLE. She had once been pleased to find that the place existed. She wished she could remember the exact moment when it had changed from a name she'd thought of to a place she could go home to.

A shopkeeper from farther down the close came out in his apron to take in a board. The chalk had run so that the price of his oranges had acquired a second tail. He wiped it with his thumb and asked whether she wanted the doorway. She said she was looking at the pub.

"They do a good supper if you're early enough," he said.

"I've heard."

He tucked the board under his arm. He'd seen her before, Penny felt sure. She couldn't tell whether he remembered her, or whether no one who wanted supper in the close seemed to him worth remembering individually.

Watson came out with Penny's gloves. "I thought you might want the one with all its fingers."

"The other has all its fingers."

"It's what you keep in them that worries me."

They stood beside one another. In the front window Alec passed from left to right carrying a tray. At the edge of the glass he vanished. A little later Jean crossed going the other way with her hands empty.

“If I asked you where Alec was now, what would you say?” Penny asked.

“Last I saw him, going towards the kitchen.”

“I’d have said he was in the kitchen. I’d have said it with some confidence.”

“Have you asked him about the night Hale died?”

“I asked whether he’d tell me if I ought to be afraid of him.”

Watson turned to look at her. Penny almost repeated the question, although she knew perfectly well Watson had heard it.

“He said he’d like to think he would.”

“What did you think of that?”

“I thought there were nicer things he could have said.”

A light came on upstairs. Penny looked up too quickly and then had to count the windows again. It was the room next to theirs. A man stood beside the curtain, trying to bring the two sides together. After a moment a second hand came into view to help him. Both hands disappeared.

"If somebody meant us to see the flyer," Penny said, "what are they waiting for us to do?"

"We've shown it to Alec. We've rung Kerr. We're standing outside a pub with two gloves between us."

"Perhaps we're meant to go home."

"Perhaps we're meant to tell James."

Penny watched the upstairs curtain settle. She could think of a great many things she would like James to come back and explain. Until that moment she had been able to think of his return as an event that would happen to the two of them. She could see now that someone else might be waiting for it, with reasons of their own.

"I don't have a way of telling him," she said.

Watson handed her both gloves. "That may be something they don't know."

The Regulars

The man in the old coat took his seat by the fire with a newspaper he didn't open. He stood up almost at once to let a woman with a walking stick get to the warmer chair. Penny remembered him doing the same thing the last time the room was full. On that occasion she had thought him kind. This time she watched the way he waited for the woman to sit before he took the chair that faced the door.

The woman tapped the floor beside her. "There's room for your feet on this side if you drop that paper."

He put the newspaper under his chair and moved one foot.

Alec came round with a bowl of potatoes. The men at the domino table made room for him, then carried on disagreeing about a game they had already finished. Someone brought the woman by the fire a cushion. She tried it for a minute and quietly put it back on the empty chair.

Penny could have drawn the room from memory the following morning. She would have got the number of chairs wrong and remembered exactly who had kept a coat on. She began to wonder what she had paid attention to on the first evening. The food. The draught from the passage. Watson's face when there had been an unexpected knock. All the rest she had known only in the way one knows there's a picture behind one's chair.

"Here," Watson said. "We can change places."

Penny looked at the chair Watson had offered. From it she could see the front door without turning her head.

"I thought I was making a fair job of hiding it."

“You nearly pulled the nail out of the chair with your thumb.”

She changed places. For a while it was enough to be able to watch people come in and recognise them. She saw Jean nod to a man from the shop up the close who had been bringing in his own newspaper for so many years that he thought the table belonged to him. She saw the woman by the fire hold a potato in the spoon until Alec could come back with a plate for it. And when a stranger came in, he was a young man asking if anybody had found a glove.

Jean sent him home with two.

Watson asked Penny where the flyer was.

"In my pocket. Why?"

"You've reached for it three times. I wondered if you wanted to show it to anyone else."

Penny looked at the man in the old coat. He was mending the tear in his newspaper with a sticky label from a glass. He turned the paper over to press the label flat, keeping the front page face down. There was nothing about it she would have thought worth noticing on any other evening.

"No," she said. "One person was enough."

"You can still ask Alec what he thought."

"I did. I asked him the wrong thing."

"You can ask him twice."

Penny finished her supper while it was hot. Later, when she looked for Alec, Jean was wiping the bar and there was a little rank of clean glasses where he had been standing. Penny went as far as the kitchen. The back door was shut. She could hear water in the pipes and, once, somebody laughing out in the close. She went back without deciding what either sound meant.

The Empty Hook

Jean was setting the chairs on the small tables, one at a time so that the people left by the fire could go on believing the evening hadn't ended. The woman with the walking stick had gone home with the man from the shop. She'd left the cushion on the empty chair. When Jean went to pick it up she found a coin underneath it.

"For the next person who doesn't want it," she said, and laid the coin on the mantel.

Penny asked if Alec would be back to lock up.

"He might. I've got a key if he isn't."

"Did he say he was going out?"

"He didn't say anything about going out to me."

Penny stood with her hand on the chair that still had the cushion. "Last time I asked you a question like that, I thought you were keeping something from me."

"I expect I was trying to get home."

"Would you tell me if there was anything you thought I ought to know?"

"Yes," Jean said. "But I'd like you to find a way of asking that gives me a chance of knowing what you want."

Penny looked towards the passage. She had managed to speak to Jean without once using the name of the man who had been found there.

"Did Alec ever tell you where he was when Hale came in?"

Jean put two chairs on a table before she answered. "He asked me if I'd put the front bolt across. I said I hadn't. I'd

got as far as looking for the man's coat on the hook, because there was nobody by the door to ask. I don't think I told Kerr that part. I didn't find a coat."

"Hale was still wearing his."

"I know that now."

Penny waited. The sound of chair legs on the tables had stopped. Jean was looking straight at her and there was no need for Penny to decide whether she was in a hurry.

"No," Jean said. "Alec never told me where he'd been."

Watson had gone to collect the bill. Penny found her at the end of the bar, going through the change.

"Jean'll want to tell Kerr something in the morning," she said.

"Does it help?"

"It might help her ask the next question."

Watson pushed the saucer of coins towards Penny so she could count them herself. Penny moved the sixpence that was covering another one. It was the only thing she had known for certain would be there when she looked.

An Early Train

Penny waited until they had paid for supper. Then she asked Watson to take the early train.

"There's no need for both of us to be here," Penny said. "I can manage one more day."

"Where shall I find you when I get back?"

"You don't have to come back."

Watson put away her purse before she answered. "Where do you plan to be when I get there?"

Penny could think of half a dozen places she might try to get to if things went badly. She could think of none she would have been able to name with an honest expectation of being there.

"I wanted to give you a choice," she said.

"You've told me which train to take."

Penny looked down at the table. Someone had written a telephone number on the edge of a beer mat, then scratched it away until there were just two figures left. She stopped herself trying to read them.

"When James told me to go home, I used to stay an extra hour if I thought he'd want something," she said. "He always knew where to ring. It took me years to wonder whether he knew I was staying for him."

"I'm here because I decided to come," Watson said. "I can decide to leave, too."

Penny nodded. She wanted to say she was sorry, but suspected Watson would consider it a way of ending the conversation before they'd got anywhere.

“What would you like to do tonight?” she asked.

“Tell Kerr where we’ll be. Ask Jean if she wants us to sit down here while she finishes. Then decide whether we want to go upstairs.”

Penny looked across at the fire. The man in the old coat had left his chair. Under it was the newspaper he’d taken so much trouble to mend.

“I’d like to stay another night,” she said. “I can’t give you a particularly good reason.”

“You’ve given me one.”

“What was it?”

“You said you’d like to.”

They went to the telephone together. Kerr was still at her desk. Penny told her they had decided to stay, and Watson leaned close enough to hear what the inspector said.

“I can still find you a place for the night.”

Penny covered the mouthpiece. Watson shook her head, and Penny said they’d stay where they were.

“I’ll have someone call in after closing,” Kerr said. “If either of you changes her mind, ring me before you go.”

Jean was taking the last of the supper plates away. When they asked if she wanted company, she sent them back to the table with a pot of tea and said she'd prefer the cups returned before she had to count them.

Penny poured. "I still have my pistol," she said quietly. "It's in the travelling case. I packed it in Guiting Power."

"Mine's in my own case upstairs."

Penny glanced towards the stair. From where she was sitting, she could see only as far as the bend.

"I'd forgotten you brought it."

"I was hoping we'd both forget."

The tea was stronger than the last pot. Watson offered Penny the hot water. Penny shook her head and drank it as it was. She had thought there would be more to say once they had decided, but for a while she was very glad there wasn't. They took the empty cups back to Jean before going upstairs.

Both Lamps

The room was warmer than the landing. The window catch gave a little rattle. Penny had shut it herself before supper, with the glove over her hand because the metal scraped. She'd tested it before she went down.

Watson set their key on the washstand. There was a box beside the lamp on her table. She touched the switch and waited for the light.

"Did you put that there?" she asked.

Penny came round the end of the bed. The printing on the lid said cartridges. There was a second box beside her own lamp. Whoever had left them had set both square to the edge of the tables. She checked the labels. Both boxes were right for the pistols they'd brought.

"No," she said.

"Neither did I."

"There was only one face on the flyer," Watson said. She looked at the travelling cases. They were where the women had left them. Her own was under the window with one strap hanging down. Penny's was against the wall, beside the chair. Nothing that belonged to them looked as if it had been moved.

"That's very considerate," Penny said. She heard herself and wished she had said anything else.

Watson turned back to her. "Did you tell anyone downstairs?"

"Only you."

There was a light on in the window across the close. An old woman had been sitting there on the first evening Penny could remember seeing the light. She had rested a book on an upright cushion and taken her glasses off whenever she turned a page. Tonight the curtain was shut. Penny could see the line where its two halves failed to meet.

She took the folded paper out of her pocket. The newspaper wrapper had picked up a faint grease mark from the supper table. It had missed the copy. She unfolded it and set it face up by her lamp, next to the box.

Watson stood a little way from the window. “Would you like me to ring Kerr again?”

Penny looked at the photograph. She had spent the afternoon trying to place the face beyond the camera. What came back now was something smaller. The way she used to let her hand fall after she’d started to wave, if she saw that the person coming towards her was looking for someone else.

“I’m still trying to remember who I was looking at,” she said.

The first shot broke the window.

A fragment of glass landed on the flyer. Watson pulled Penny down.

“I expect better of SPECTOR,” Penny said.